Effects of **World Youth Days** and **Australian Catholic Youth Festivals**

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In the lead up to World Youth Day 2008 in Sydney there was significant opposition, especially in some sections of the media, often questioning the logistical and financial cost; some Catholic pastors and people had parallel concerns (Fisher, p. 392). The late Fr John McSweeney, long-time Pastor of Kingsgrove Parish, voiced what was perhaps the concern of some others within the Church when he said he “was never in favour” of WYD08 in Sydney because such festivals only attract “the sheep who were [already] safe in the fold” and have no significant impact on those “who were straying or lost” (McSweeney, p. 570). He also thought WYD was “very traditional in its religious practices” appealing to “the more conservative elements of our Church”. Others have complained that returnees do little to increase the life of our parishes.

It is legitimate to ask whether all the planning, effort and expense put into WYD and ACYF are worth it. I think the answer is yes, but the question is an important one and so I have tried to collect together some of the empirical evidence here. We are yet to have research on the effect of the first ACYF, conducted in December 2013, but my guess is that it will yield some similar fruits. We have also done some “at home” research in the Diocese of Parramatta and found that a very high proportion of those currently engaged in youth ministry, a very high proportion of those in our seminary, and a high proportion of young Catholics currently engaged in other ministries in our parishes and diocese, have not only been to a WYD but would credit that experience with being a major part of their conversion / formation / passion for their current and future Church involvement. But if priests and people are to continue to give “blood and treasure” for our young people to attend such international and national events, they may need some reassurance that this really helps. This paper attempts to provide that.

One caveat, however: we all recognize, as the Gospels repeatedly warn us, that we will not always see the fruits of our pastoral efforts – or see them any time soon – let alone be able to measure them. Sociological research of the effects of pastoral initiatives will only take us so far. Nonetheless there have been some important studies that might assist our thinking about WYDs and ACYFs and how to maximise their effectiveness.
Context: The Need for the New Evangelisation

Declining ‘religious sense’ and increasing secularisation are sociological facts that our clergy and people confront on many levels. One symptom is the declining connection of many young people with the Church, even if they grow up in families that self-identify as Catholic or Christian and go to schools that are officially Catholic. We know that they live in a culture that may be ‘spiritual’ in some ways but which may also be inoculating them to ‘religion’ and that that culture has very powerful organs in the old and new media, the academy, technology and commerce, popular entertainments etc. – organs often more influential that the family-parish-school triad upon which the Church has traditionally relied for the transmission of faith and practice. As Pope Francis noted in Evangelii Gaudium, secularisation reduces religion to the “private and personal” and rejects the transcendent, with an attendant rise in relativism and decline in ethics and the sense of sin [64]. Australia is fairly typical of the modern West in this and has been experiencing this kind secularisation since at least the 1960s, even if Christianity still has significant strengths in our culture and society.

There is so much more that might be said about our religious and cultural context, but it is unsurprising that as things stand many young people are disoriented and find it hard to commit to Church (or much else). One of the leading researchers regarding young people’s religiosity in Australia, Michael Mason, says that the vast majority of young Australian Catholics, including Catholic school students, are only ‘nominal’ Church members (Mason, “World Youth Day 2008,” p. 347). He suggests that religious youth festivals such as WYD represent a “small-scale remnant” of what used to be the norm whereby adolescents went through a stage of religious socialisation and continued to construct an identity based, at least in part, upon their religious heritage and upbringing. Today, however, the surrounding culture makes traditional Christian faith a minority option and the decision to adopt the Catholic faith of one’s parents is no longer a ‘routine’ step but rather a much more conscious one involving “considerable costs”. Those adolescents who choose to be Catholic will become part of a “cognitive minority at school” and amongst their peer group, and so be associated with the ideology “of a deviant group” (Mason, “Converts at World Youth Day,” p. 20). They will need far more support if they are to maintain that identity than previous generations needed.
WYD and ACYF as a means of evangelising youth culture

Since St John XXIII all the popes have recognized that formerly and still-formally Christian societies, cultures (including youth culture) and institutions (including families, parishes and schools) are in need of re-evangelisation or “new evangelisation”. This has been at the heart of Pope Francis’ call to missionary discipleship e.g. in *Evanglii Gaudium* [e.g. 27].

WYD and ACYF are designed in part to be “therapy for a part of the Church and a culture in which not all is well” (Fisher, p. 393). Through their mission experience, catecheses, liturgies and the rest, WYD challenges, feeds and commissions young Catholics. Such festivals give young Catholics an opportunity to be unabashedly Catholic for a period, without being pressed upon all sides by an overbearing materialism and secularism. It gives them a kind of “Catholic intensive” – “an intense from of Catholic life, with regular prayers, daily Mass, and large-scale religious celebrations”. The Pope’s presence and the charisma attaching to his office are highly relevant in this regard (see Mason, “What did we gain?”).

Moreover, deep-seated human needs for connectedness, solidarity and spirituality are served in an unparalleled way by the large-scale ‘events’ of WYD, the rituals, catechetical and formative experiences, the opportunities for confession and conversion, and the experience of interpersonal connectedness. Recent studies by Mason, Rymarz and Cleary all indicate that these effects upon WYD pilgrims are not only very positive but also enduring. Pilgrims move from a passive and pick-and-choose attitude to the Church, to “an active to a committed model of affiliation” with a greater sense of their Catholic identity and a personal commitment to the life of the Church (e.g. Rymarz, “Impact of WYD”). Put baldly: WYDs and ACYFs make it more likely that already consciously Catholic young people will stay so, and that some of them will become more strongly connected and engaged.

Catholic institutions also report positive effects from WYDs. The Australian Catholic Youth Council is strongly of the view that youth ministry across our country is in a much healthier position than it was before WYD: our diocese alone has more than ninety active youth groups and ministries, which was certainly not the case a decade ago. Seminaries across the country, and those (few) religious communities with new members, also report that the most consistent common thread amongst seminarians, novices and applicants is WYD.

“I stand stronger in my faith following my experience... knowing I don’t have to hide away my beliefs from those not willing to believe.”

*Tom Guthrie*

“It has made me a better person and brought me closer to God. The festival has also given me new friends who share the same beliefs and values. After this experience I will now be more confident in my faith and encouraged to build on it, spreading the Word of God through my actions.”

*Jonathan Soans*
Catholic Education Offices also report that this is a common theme amongst the more faith-enthusiastic young teachers.

In addition to personal conversion and identity, WYDs serve cultural and evangelical ends: they are about “ad extra” evangelisation as much as “ad intra” support for particular young people. Even if WYDs and ACYFs mostly attract the already committed – and this claim requires considerable nuancing – there is little doubt that the preparation for, celebration of, and afterglow from these events speaks to the families, schools and parishes that are connected to the pilgrims and to the surrounding culture. WYDs ‘showcase’ the Catholic faith for the entire world to see, often with positive and surprising results.

I have recounted elsewhere some of the conversion stories of non-believers becoming Catholic through WYD (Fisher, pp. 394-7): many other commentators have similar anecdotes. Needless to say, there was much positive press and other coverage around the time of WYD Sydney and there have been many WYD-related testimonials. Even Fr McSweeney became a WYD convert, praising Cardinal Pell for being able to pull WYD off and Pope Benedict’s gentle charisma, and arguing that Australia would have lost out if it had not had WYD (p. 572).

Even if WYD only addressed the already ‘converted’, however, there can be little doubt that many young Catholics presently identifying as Catholic will not do so in a decade or two from now unless there are active measures to strengthen their attachment. Feeding the lambs inside the fold is one of our goals, just as is bringing those sheep who are not yet of this fold under the one Good Shepherd. As Mason finds, WYD reinforces those “relatively devoted” teens who will experience trials of faith as they progress to young adulthood: WYD is “by no means superfluous” for them and contributes to the achievement of WYD organisers’ goals (Mason, “What did we gain?” p. 336).
“This festival has been truly epic, even to the point of life changing. It’s reinforced my faith to an even higher level.”

Benjamin Frankel
Some salient findings of the research

Some of the most important statistical and other findings relating to the benefits of WYD include:

- 70% of respondents considered WYD Sydney to be one of the best experiences of their lives or that it was ‘life changing’ (Mason, Singleton & Webber, p. 11)

- A survey of school-aged Australian pilgrims at the Madrid and Rio WYDs found that 84% strongly agreed that WYD was one of the best experiences of their lives; that three quarters of attendees strongly agreed that the events and atmosphere of WYD had been a ‘powerful spiritual experience’ that had differed in positive ways to their experience of ‘Church’ until then, had deepened their relationship to God and increased their sense of belonging to the Church; and 44.8% strongly agreed that they felt a strong sense of God’s presence (Cleary, “WYD: What difference does it make?” p. 11)

- A survey of under-18 Australian WYD 2005 participants found that: 46.8% rated it 10/10 as a very positive experience, with the mean score being 9.05; 98.6% agreed that WYD strengthened their faith; more than half said it increased their parish involvement and two thirds that they were more likely to discuss faith/religion with parents or friends; 71.4% said they were more or much more likely to pray; 41.3% were more or much more likely to attend Mass; and 28.6% said they were more or much more likely to go to Confession; overall attending WYD was found to make strong religious expression post-WYD more plausible (Rymarz, “Impact of WYD”)

- The “experience of Church” is most spiritually helpful aspect of WYDs because it enables pilgrims to sense that “God was present in this large gathering of people sharing and celebrating the same faith” and that they were not alone or eccentric in holding to the Catholic faith (Mason, Singleton & Webber, First look p. vii; Mason, “What did we gain?,” p. 342); WYDs are a “fertile environment for the emergence of communitas” i.e. an experience of connectedness and solidarity with others (Cleary, “WYD: What difference does it make?,” p. 11)

- Even if many WYD attendees are already fairly religious, more than two fifths of attendees report that “their faith in God had been strengthened and that they had a closer relationship with Jesus” after WYD and that they expected their faith to now have greater impact on their lives; they now wanted to learn more about their faith and live their discipleship more consciously and actively (Mason, Singleton & Webber, pp. vii, 38)

- 55% of those who described themselves or were classified by sociologists as already ‘devoted’ before attending WYD, 63% of those already ‘involved’ and 54% of those classified as ‘open’ expressed recommitment as a result of WYD; an “amazing” 42% of those classified as merely ‘social’ Catholics before WYD were also recommitted (Mason, “What did we gain?” p. 343)
Amongst the signs of this recommitment, 50% were more confident about the reality of God, 56% were not embarrassed now to let others see they were believers, 35% attended Mass more often, 67% reported praying more, 46% attended Reconciliation more, and 57% contributed more to parish life (Mason, “What did we gain?” p. 345).

There were also changes in moral and civic attitudes: 44% agreed that due to WYD their religious faith would have more influence on their daily lives; 54% said they were determined to be more Christ-like; 60% said they would give time (or more than they had in the past) as a volunteer; and 92% of returnees had a more positive view of themselves and the contribution they could make; Mason concluded that in this respect “The Church’s gain from WYD was significant” (Mason, “What did we gain?” p. 345).

In another study of pilgrims to WYD Sydney, Mason found evidence both of renewed allegiance of already committed young Catholics and a more radical ‘conversion’ of previously unbelievers or disconnected believers (Mason, “ Converts”); more than the major events the general ambience of “Faith, Church and Holy Spirit” seem to have been important factors (pp. 17-8) and that traditional practices such as Eucharistic adoration and the Rosary had a significant impact (pp. 18-9).

Webber found that WYD Sydney had a significant impact upon the determination of the returnees to do more in respect of a number of measures, irrespective of their prior level of involvement in Church life; for some this was great involvement in civic activities and voluntary work – the social Gospel – rather than ecclesial ones such as being around the parish more; they saw this changed behaviour as an expression of their faith.

Cleary suggests that school-aged pilgrims have different attitudes to faith, religious practice, community and self than adult pilgrims; although less connected on average with the Church, they do not appear to be disaffected or indifferent to the Gospel and they approach WYDs with a heightened sense of anticipation (“Pilgrims or Tourists,” p. 19).
Conclusion

In the long run, the effectiveness of WYD or ACYF depends hugely on the formation that is offered in advance of attendance and the follow-up that occurs afterwards: what opportunities there are for sharing, evangelising, worshipping, leading and serving for those who will go and for those who return ‘on fire with faith’. Most effective youth ministries, parishes and dioceses use the prospect of attendance at WYD (and now ACYF) as an opportunity to do things with their young people that they would want to be doing anyway: festivals are hooks upon which many different things can be hung. Given the reluctance of many young people to commit to joining programmes of formation, the prospect of a festival may also act as an incentive or goad to such commitment. For future lay churchworkers these festivals are often a useful part of their spiritual and professional formation, much as a period in seminary or religious life proved to be for many in the past. From past WYDs we see many returnees becoming active in youth groups and other ministries, joining the seminary or religious life, or being more engaged in their parishes or chaplaincies, or bringing their faith to bear in new ways on their life. But as I warned at the beginning of my paper, some of the significant and lasting fruits will not be apparent immediately and we must not feel our efforts have been a failure because Mass attendance among the young has not jumped dramatically after a festival! What is overwhelmingly clear is that once ‘the big event’ is over the job of the clergy, youth ministers, parishes, schools and families is far from over: in fact it has only begun. “The moment has come,” as St John Paul II said, “to commit all of the Church’s energies to a new evangelization... No believer in Christ, no institution of the Church, can avoid this supreme duty: to proclaim Christ to all peoples.”

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Mason, Michael; Singleton, Andrew; and Webber, Ruth, A first look at the Australian pilgrims of World Youth Day 2008 Preliminary survey findings (May 2009).


NOTE: The abovementioned secondary sources can be accessed at https://www.dropbox.com/sh/wgo6haiskmoo4n/AAC41FHBvRrBR76jF3fIzqdHa
“Even now I struggle to find the words to describe how I felt. I have really benefitted from this experience and I hope I can bring back the positivity I have gained and help others find their faith, as I have learnt so much and understand so much more.”

Georgina Dodd

“It’s been inspiring to proudly celebrate my Catholic identity with the rest of the youth. To have had witnessed the faith so strong in the Young Church has developed me as a person in the hope of becoming a better Christian. Truly, there was no better way to gain a deeper understanding about my spirituality.”

Edinelle Rabi